



# Helping Teachers Support 'Whole Learners' Collection

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# Helping Teachers Support ‘Whole Learners’: Going Beyond Academics to Foster Student Success

By Lija Farnham and Aviva Altmann

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“We know why kids don’t learn. It’s either poverty, low attendance, negative peer influences.... But one of the things that we never discuss, or we rarely discuss, is the value and importance of human connection. Relationships.”

RITA PIERSON, TEACHER (FROM HER TED TALK “EVERY KID NEEDS A CHAMPION”)

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Decades of effort and billions of dollars have been invested in our public school systems to improve learning and reduce gaps in outcomes between students. Educators who have been at the helm of reform know that no silver bullet solution exists to address these gaps. Yet, philanthropists, school districts, charter school operators, and nonprofits continue to search for answers. What, they ask, can we do to realize better results for students, especially for low-income students and students of color who face significant systemic barriers and predictable and worsening outcomes?

Voluminous research, evidence from leading educational initiatives, and advice from thought leaders and educators pointed us in the same direction. The most promising intervention is right in front of our noses and present in every classroom: the *teacher*. Specifically, it’s teachers creating equitable learning environments informed by the science of learning and development. (Bridgespan’s 2015 article “Rethinking How Students Succeed” published on the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* website introduced our thinking on the role of the teacher in cultivating effective learners.<sup>1</sup>)

At their best, teachers create classroom conditions that support “whole learner” development by cultivating genuine, trusting relationships with their students, and structuring challenging and supportive classroom learning environments.<sup>2</sup> A growing body of research confirms that teachers can foster social, emotional, and academic skills, mindsets, and

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1 Lija Farnham, Gihani Fernando, Mike Perigo, & Colleen Brosman, with Paul Tough, “Rethinking How Students Succeed,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, February 17, 2015, [https://ssir.org/up\\_for\\_debate/article/rethinking\\_how\\_students\\_succeed](https://ssir.org/up_for_debate/article/rethinking_how_students_succeed).

2 Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012; Paul Tough, *Helping Children Succeed*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

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habits among their students (e.g., [a sense of belonging](#) and [a growth mindset](#)).<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, we don't prepare teachers adequately to do any of these things. The current system perpetuates a primary focus on academic content mastery, largely ignoring the significant research base that indicates such content mastery will not be possible without a more holistic approach to student learning. But we can do better, says Robert C. Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia: "For too long, [we] have not attended to the explosion of information on relationships as core assets in fostering students' learning and development. We now know enough to change that."<sup>4</sup>

The challenge that confronts every district and school is how to take something that is human and unique in nature—a supportive relationship between a teacher and a student—and replicate it in every classroom. A number of leading nonprofit organizations have taken on this challenge and succeeded in systematizing approaches that prepare teachers to put relationships front and center. This is not wishful theory. Rather, it is powerful practice. Supportive relationships combined with rigorous academics produce breakthrough results grounded in practical, daily interactions, and practices. We highlight three nonprofits that put this kind of practice into action.

The [BARR Center](#), [EL Education](#), and [Equal Opportunity Schools](#) have developed successful, yet very different, approaches that help teachers create relationship-centric, supportive classroom and school cultures. Each now operates in over 100 schools and plans to grow. We believe they hold the promise of working at much greater scale—in particular, because they are embedded within existing public school structures and processes versus being one-off or add-on programs.

While BARR, EL Education, and Equal Opportunity Schools have distinct approaches, they share three essential characteristics that aide their success. They create a "positive disruption" that leads to change; focus on the whole learner by helping educators to develop and anchor on a fuller picture of each student; and foster the development of supportive relationships among educators. We have chosen one example, drawn from more detailed case studies of the three nonprofits, to illustrate each of these points.

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ROBERT C. PIANTA, DEAN, CURRY SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

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<sup>3</sup> The "whole learner" approach builds on work by the [University of Chicago Consortium on School Research](#), the [Science of Learning and Development initiative](#), and the [Mindset Scholars Network](#), among others.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Lee Colvin, *Supporting the Whole Teacher: Developing educators' social and emotional skills lays the foundation for success with students*, Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2017, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/supporting-the-whole-teacher/>.

## Creating a positive disruption that leads to change

"Schools ask us to come in and focus time and attention on kids," explains Ron Berger, chief academic officer of EL Education. It began as a school transformation model and has expanded nationally to provide districts with a comprehensive language arts curriculum and aligned professional development. "We tell them, it's not just about kids; it's about us as adults. Our vision of building student character is predicated on a school culture that changes how adults interact with each other and with kids."

Memphis teacher Tracy Haynes describes how that disrupts classroom business as usual: "EL Education's curriculum has changed me as a teacher, pushing my own growth mindset. It pulled me off the stage and put my students on the stage. They're leading conversations and thinking through their own answers and processes. Even if they don't get it right the first time, they keep trying."

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TRACY HAYNES, TEACHER, MEMPHIS

EL Education, originally called Expeditionary Learning, emerged in 1991 from a collaboration between The Harvard Graduate School of Education and Outward Bound USA.<sup>5</sup> The organization advances a three-dimensional definition of student achievement that puts character side-by-side with mastery of knowledge and skills and high-quality student work. Its curriculum— informed by lessons from years of school transformation work—is not just about delivering rigorous content. Teachers serve as

coaches and facilitators of learning, different from a traditional instruction-centric model with a teacher lecturing at the front of the classroom. In fact, 80–90 percent of the curriculum is comprised of teacher guides, versus the typical worksheets and assignments.<sup>6</sup>

Because implementing the curriculum requires a fundamentally different approach than what most teachers are used to, new schools ideally go through several months of professional development, classroom observation, and co-teaching. A report from [Mathematica](#) found that English language arts teachers who participated in EL Education's professional development program aligned with its curriculum significantly improved their instructional practices after one year.<sup>7</sup> This is true for both new and veteran teachers—demonstrating the potential of this kind of professional development to transform teacher practice. And after two years, the program had positive effects on students' English language arts achievement.



Students and their teacher at Hollis Innovation Academy, an EL Education school in Atlanta, GA.  
Credit: EL Education

<sup>5</sup> The Bridgespan Group has assisted EL Education with strategic planning.

<sup>6</sup> EL Education's curriculum can be found on its website at <https://curriculum.eleducation.org/>,

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Dolfin et al., *Evaluation of the Teacher Potential Project*, Mathematica, June 28, 2019, <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/publications/evaluation-of-the-teacher-potential-project>.

EL Education's approach requires a lot from teachers and school leaders. "These materials look and feel very different than materials we've used in the past," says April Imperio, executive director of K-12 Literacy and Early Learning with the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD). The district began using the language arts curriculum in 2018 in all of its K-8 classrooms. In Detroit, as it does in many other communities where it supports implementation, EL Education partnered with district leaders to plan and organize a multiday comprehensive teacher institute prior to the beginning of the school year. The district partners with EL Education to provide ongoing professional learning, coaching, and other direct supports that are critical in helping teachers and schools as they manage the technical and adaptive changes required of implementing new high-quality instructional materials.

While emphasizing how much excitement there has been among DPSCD teachers about the curriculum, Imperio is also candid about the challenges. "The other side of all the excitement is the anxiety that comes along with change for school leaders and teachers. You're coming up against years of work implementing other curricula that did not align to the rigor of the standards. Teachers have been wondering—will this work?" EL Education's Amy Bailey, managing director of district partnerships, describes an interaction with a teacher at the Detroit institute. "What he was hearing did not necessarily align with what he already practiced as a teacher, and he eventually said, 'I'm scared, I don't know if I can do this.'" But Bailey has seen this kind of doubt in teachers across the country, and views the questioning and uncertainty as a step toward change. "He *can* do it—because otherwise he wouldn't even be asking the question."

As a part of the ongoing professional learning plan, "we brought principals together to calibrate on quality implementation 'look fors,'" explains Imperio. Now that teachers were using the curriculum, Imperio says, "there were opportunities to reflect on the early stages of implementation and how the curriculum was supporting teachers with the district's vision of excellent instruction for literacy."

Bailey points out that engaging with a curriculum as different from standard practice as this one can be challenging. All the more reason why the coaching and ongoing engagement with principals, as well as other elements of professional development, need to continue, whether delivered by EL Education or the school district itself. "Teachers often report that initially when they look at the curriculum, they believe it's too hard for their students," says Bailey. "But as they see the changes in their students, and students feel it, the classroom environment starts to shift. When you walk into a classroom where implementation is moving forward, the change is palpable."<sup>8</sup>

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AMY BAILEY, MANAGING DIRECTOR, DISTRICT PARTNERSHIPS, EL EDUCATION

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<sup>8</sup> You can read more about EL Education's approach in Bridgespan's case study "EL Education: Helping Teachers to Foster Learning and Build Character," <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/education/el-education-foster-learning-build-character>.

## Anchoring on the “whole learner”

To help students cultivate motivation and perseverance and build authentic relationships, educators need to understand their students beyond just academics—their interests, strengths, aspirations, and mindsets. This fuller picture of each student helps to overcome biases and foster genuine, caring, trusting relationships. Consider how Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS) helps educators see their students as whole learners in an effort to open up access to Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes for students of color and low-income students.

Over 90 percent of all US high schools offer at least one AP course, but within these schools, students of color and low-income students are systematically under-enrolled. More than three-quarters of a million high school students qualify for—but are missing from—these advanced classes.

Since its founding in 2010, EOS has helped more than 540 schools in 29 states identify and enroll upwards of 36,000 of these “missing” students, and support their success in rigorous academic programs. San Jose Unified School District, for example, more than doubled the number of students of color and low-income students in AP and IB with no drop in exam pass rates.

Many schools have not systematically thought about the extent to which historically marginalized students are discouraged from taking advanced classes. Hence, EOS works with each school to understand its unique dynamics and prepares a team of teachers, counselors, and administrators to develop and implement a set of strategies in service of equitable outcomes for their students. To that end, EOS collects and shares enrollment data and results from a survey of students and staff. In addition, the Student Insight Card, which includes a student’s aspirations, strengths, learning mindsets, barriers to learning, academic track record, and teachers’ recommendations, is an especially important tool

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for helping schools identify and support missing students. The Insight Cards help educators to tailor outreach and build trusting relationships with students whom they previously only knew mainly through an academic lens.

EOS data gathering reveals, for instance, that in most schools “[missing] students’ aspirations for college tend to be higher than staff estimates,” says Adam Kay, EOS’s former director of effectiveness and learning. “This highlights the barriers students face in pursuing AP classes. They think: ‘I don’t feel encouraged, I don’t feel welcome.’” In fact, teachers

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BERNADETTE MERIKLE, SENIOR DIRECTOR, STRATEGY FOR RACIAL EQUITY IMPACT, EOS



San Diego Unified School District participants partner up in small teams to compete in the drawing contest, as part of the fourth Equity Lab session. (May 2019) Credit: Chris Wojdak Photography/Equal Opportunity Schools ©2019

typically rely on grades and test scores to identify students for AP or IB classes. “When they do so, they tend to exclude a lot of students,” says Kay.

EOS also asks students to list the adults they trust. “People are afraid that students will say, ‘I don’t trust anyone,’ ” says Bernadette Merikle, EOS’s senior director of strategy for racial equity impact. “Time and time again what we find is that students have multiple trusted adults. And for those students who don’t, we can work on that.”

In the second year of EOS’s work with a school, as a more demographically representative group of students enters advanced courses, teachers and school leaders continue to develop this fuller picture of students. Teachers use the Student Insight Cards as a reference point to connect with students on a personal level, support them to address barriers they may be facing, and assess progress. “When teachers finally receive their first semester grades from the students enrolled, that can be powerful,” says Kay. “A number of teachers come around in their predictions that some students will fail or struggle.”<sup>9</sup>

## Fostering the development of supportive relationships among educators

High school teachers typically interact largely with colleagues in the same discipline, such as math or English. BARR breaks down these departmental silos by forming cross-disciplinary teams that change the way teachers interact with each other and with students. The concept took shape in response to the need to help more ninth graders succeed in their first year of high school.

Twenty-one years ago, Angela Jerabek nearly quit her job as a ninth-grade counselor at St. Louis Park High School in suburban Minneapolis. She felt discouraged over the high number of ninth graders failing at least one course, and helpless to remedy the problem. Encouraged by her school’s principal, she channeled her frustration into developing an innovative program that builds connections between students and teachers to help both succeed. She called it Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR). BARR focuses on ninth graders because they face a make-or-break transitional year from middle school to high school. Research shows that students who succeed in the ninth grade tend to graduate. Many who struggle eventually drop out.

Today, BARR operates in over 100 high schools in 15 states and the District of Columbia, and Jerabek is CEO of a fast-growing organization. Over the next three years, the



Students participate in the Lollipop Moment I-Time—an activity in which students and staff reflect on a time someone did or said something that made a difference in their lives. They then write letters to those people and school staff will assist with sending them if students choose to. Credit: Zachary Smith

9 You can read more about EOS’s approach in the case study, “Equal Opportunity Schools: Helping Teachers Close the Classroom Equity Gap,” <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/education/equal-opportunity-schools-close-classroom-gap>.

number of BARR schools is expected to more than double with financial support from the US Department of Education. BARR stands out as the sole project out of 172 federal education innovation grants to progress through randomized controlled trials to win funding at three levels: innovation, development, and scaling up. BARR raises test scores and pass rates, and it reduces absences and suspensions. Fewer students ultimately drop out because they feel more engaged and challenged at school. The effects are particularly large for students of color, male students, and students from low-income families.

One of the most striking aspects of BARR's approach in schools is how it builds relationships among educators—requiring at least three ninth-grade teachers from core academic areas to form a team that works with the same group of students. That means, for instance, the same students have English, math, and social studies together. A large high school may have multiple teacher teams, each with a distinctive student cohort. This team and cohort approach requires significant retooling of the way schools handle class assignments. But it's critical for the BARR model. These cross-disciplinary teams change the way teachers interact. In a typical high school, teachers meet periodically for departmental professional development discussions. BARR breaks down the departmental silos and shifts the conversation from a strictly academic focus to a whole-student perspective.

That more complete view of students takes shape in weekly team meetings, called block time, where teachers share observations of each student's strengths and challenges. Block time centers on what Jerabek calls one of the BARR model's "defining pillars": real-time data. The team works off a spreadsheet that builds a picture of each student by reviewing a variety of in-school factors, including progress in class, attendance, and behavior. The team also discusses factors outside the school, such as extracurricular interests, personal health, issues with other students, or troubles at home. All this data collection allows the team to flag challenges early and work together to solve problems.

It is not unusual for teachers to express skepticism of the BARR model when first introduced. Josh Tripp, a former math teacher and now the principal of Bucksport High School in Maine, remembers his initial hesitation. "Our graduation rate was only 73 percent, so we had to try something. I was on board," he recalls, "but I was a little skeptical of the social and emotional learning piece. I was that math teacher saying, 'do I have to give up 30 minutes of my week and not do math?'"

The BARR approach requires all teachers in the cohort to participate and play equal roles to ensure the success of the block-time meeting. Tripp says that teachers at his school now realize if they don't get their data together, the meeting isn't productive. "My colleagues are sitting here, thinking, 'why didn't you do all the stuff that needs to be done?'" says Tripp. "They are increasingly accountable to their peers—and that is so powerful." Bucksport High School's graduation rate is now 90 percent.<sup>10</sup>

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**“**[Our teachers] are increasingly accountable to their peers—and that is so powerful.”

JOSH TRIPP, FORMER MATH TEACHER, CURRENT PRINCIPAL, BUCKSPORT HIGH SCHOOL, MAINE

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<sup>10</sup> You can read more about BARR's approach in the case study, "The BARR Center: Helping Teachers Connect with Each Other and Their Students," <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/education/barr-center-teachers-connect-and-with-students>.

## What will it take for all teachers to experience these approaches?

BARR, EL Education, and Equal Opportunity Schools demonstrate the power and potential of building teacher capacity to create supportive relationships and learning environments for all students. In different ways, each program helps teachers see and respond to students as whole learners. Not only are these three programs effective, they are readily scalable by *tapping into existing structures and resources* rather than adding new ones.

EL Education distributes its curriculum without charge, which could free up district curriculum budgets to cover professional development to support implementation. EOS helps schools improve opportunities for students of color through schools' existing Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes. And BARR helps students succeed by building relationships among existing educators rather than, say, adding or replacing staff. By working to improve existing systems rather than create new ones, these approaches can succeed faster, cost less, and sustain themselves in the longer run.

But what will it take for these and other effective whole learner approaches to take root in every school and district? We offer a few ideas—first and foremost, to change the ways teachers are trained and developed.

Educators and policymakers need to recognize and understand what science tells us—that factors like a student's sense of belonging and self-management skills are critical drivers of learning. “While teacher-student relationships are often characterized as the ‘soft’ side of schooling, in fact they are foundational to student success, especially for students who have been traditionally underserved by public schools,” concluded a recent study by FutureEd at Georgetown University.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, teachers play a critical role in creating the kinds of relationships and environments that either contribute to or hinder student success. That means we need to make significant changes to how we train teachers. This could include spreading models like the three highlighted here. It could also include applying the common characteristics of these three approaches to existing teacher preparation and professional development models. Many school districts currently spend millions of dollars each year—totaling billions of dollars nationally—on teacher professional development. Yet, research shows that the vast majority of that professional development is low-quality and **does not lead to sustained change<sup>12</sup>** and improvement in teacher practice.

In short, funding that is already available but being spent on ineffective approaches should move toward professional learning models that help teachers to foster the development of their students as whole learners. And a number of approaches have already proven their

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<sup>11</sup> Craig Wacker and Lynn Olson, *Teacher Mindsets, How Educators' Perspectives Shape Student Success*, FutureEd, Georgetown University, June 2019.

<sup>12</sup> *The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth About Our Quest for Teacher Development*, TNP, 2015, <https://tnp.org/publications/view/the-mirage-confronting-the-truth-about-our-quest-for-teacher-development>.

worth in hundreds of schools across the country. But hundreds of schools fall far short of addressing the real need. Education leaders, funders, and policymakers should think hard about what it will take to turn promising approaches into something transformative—for teachers and students all across the country.

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*The authors would like to thank Mike Perigo, former Bridgespan partner and now senior director of Education at the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, as well as editors Roger Thompson and Bradley Seeman for their contributions to this article.*

CASE STUDY

EL Education



EL Education



**Year established:**  
1991



**Goal:**

Increase student engagement and achievement by focusing on mastery of knowledge and skills, character, and high-quality student work.



**Impact:**

EL Education supports a network of 150 pre-K-12 public schools in 30 states and has launched an open source K-8 English language arts curriculum that has been downloaded more than 10 million times across 45 states. After three years of attending a school in the EL Education network, students gain an average of seven months in reading achievement and 10 months in math achievement. Teachers who participated in EL Education's professional development program aligned with its curriculum significantly improved their instructional practices after one year, and after two years saw positive effects on student achievement.



**Change strategy:**

(1) Introduces a positive disruption by focusing on changing how teachers teach, rather than simply the material that they cover in class. (2) Focuses on the "whole learner" by infusing character throughout all facets of the model, and explicitly through small groups of students called Crews in its school model. (3) Fosters supportive relationships among educators by bringing them together in training institutes and other forums to work collaboratively in implementing its school model and curriculum.

# Helping Teachers to Foster Learning and Build Character

By Lija Farnham and Emma Nothmann

"Schools ask us to come in and focus time and attention on kids," says Ron Berger, chief academic officer of EL Education, a national nonprofit with a 25-year track record of inspiring teachers and students to achieve more than they thought possible. "And we tell them, it's not just about kids; it's about us as adults. Our vision of building student character is predicated on a school culture that changes how adults interact with each other and with kids."

EL Education, originally called Expeditionary Learning, grew out of a 1991 collaboration between the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Outward Bound USA.<sup>1</sup> From the outset, it created a whole-school transformation model that addresses every aspect of a school's instructional program, culture, and leadership. "Kids in traditional schools sometimes act like they're on a cruise ship, where they sit on deck and

<sup>1</sup> The Bridgespan Group has assisted EL Education with strategic planning.

teachers bring them stuff to do,” Berger told the *Washington Post*. “We think of school more like a sailing schooner, where everybody, both kids and adults, are pitching in and swabbing the deck but also charting the course.”<sup>2</sup>

EL Education advocates a three-dimensional view of student achievement that puts character side-by-side with mastery of rigorous content and high quality work. That means teachers and school leaders must model a school-wide culture of respect and compassion, and prioritize social and emotional learning and supportive classroom environments, along with fostering high-quality academic learning.

Teachers and students pitch in to implement two core EL Education elements: “expeditionary learning” projects that involve small groups of students as active learners with teachers as their guides; and small groups of students called Crews who stick together throughout the school year and meet daily along with a teacher-adviser to support and challenge each other.

EL Education’s model helps teachers form a fuller picture of each student so they can better support them socially, emotionally, and academically. Crew teams are the key to making this happen. These small groups usually meet for at least a half hour a day and typically remain together as the students move from grade to grade. Teachers, and sometimes administrators, serve as Crew leaders. The leaders’ effectiveness does not come from subject matter expertise, and the focus isn’t on assignments. Rather, it is about building strong, lasting relationships with students that help them persevere through challenging tasks and adversity in school and life. At its best, Crew isn’t confined to a 30-minute block. Rather, it embodies the spirit of camaraderie, teamwork, and authenticity that needs to underlie all the interactions in the school building every day.

The school model works. Research by Mathematica has shown that after three years of attending a school in the EL Education network, students gain an average of seven months in reading achievement and 10 months in math achievement.<sup>3</sup> They outperform their peers in the district on state tests, with the greatest gains for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students.

Over more than two decades, EL Education has built its network to 150 pre-K-12 public schools in more than 30 states. To join, at least 40 percent of a school’s students must come from low-income families. The intensive, in-person training and coaching required for these partnerships, and the expense for participating schools, limit further growth.

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RON BERGER, CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER,  
EL EDUCATION

2 Chris Berdik, “What if personalized learning was less about me and more about us?” *The Hechinger Report*, December 23, 2018, <https://hechingerreport.org/what-if-personalized-learning-was-less-about-me-and-more-about-us/>.

3 Ira Nichols-Barrer and Joshua Haimson, Impacts of Five Expeditionary Learning Middle Schools on Academic Achievement, Mathematica Policy Research, July 8, 2013, <https://www.mathematica.org/our-publications-and-findings/publications/impacts-of-five-expeditionary-learning-middle-schools-on-academic-achievement>.

To spread its approach, EL Education launched an open-source K-8 English language arts curriculum that has been downloaded more than 10 million times across 45 states. The lessons “bake in a focus on collaboration, character, and personalization in terms of kids showing evidence of their own learning,” said Berger in a *Hechinger Report* article.<sup>4</sup> Teachers serve as coaches and facilitators of learning, different from a traditional instruction-centric model with a teacher lecturing at the front of the classroom. In fact, 80-90 percent of the curriculum is comprised of teacher guides, versus the typical worksheets and assignments.<sup>5</sup>

Because EL Education is so focused on changing how teachers teach, rather than simply the material that they cover in class, it requires a fundamentally different approach. Accordingly, the organization provides teachers at its new network schools—those engaging in a multiyear, whole-school transformation—several months of professional development, plus classroom coaching by EL Education master teachers. Teachers and school leaders also participate in an intensive, three-day “action institute” to prepare them for EL Education’s approach. For districts and schools using the open-source curriculum, EL Education offers on-site professional development modeled after the approach developed to support whole-school transformation.

“These materials look and feel very different than materials we’ve used in the past,” says April Imperio, executive director of K-12 Literacy with the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), which began using the language arts curriculum in 2018 in all of its K-8 classrooms. In Detroit, as it does in many other communities where it supports implementation, EL Education partnered with district leaders to plan and organize



Students at Harborside Academy, an EL Education school in Kenosha, WI. Credit: EL Education

<sup>4</sup> Berdik, “What if personalized learning was less about me and more about us?”

<sup>5</sup> You can see EL Education’s curriculum on its website, <https://curriculum.eeducation.org>.

a multiday comprehensive teacher institute prior to the beginning of the school year. EL Education and the district continue to partner, providing ongoing professional learning, coaching, and other direct supports to help teachers and schools manage the technical and adaptive changes associated with implementing the new instructional materials.

While emphasizing how much excitement there has been among DPSCD teachers about the curriculum, Imperio is also candid about the challenges. “The other side of all the excitement is the anxiety that comes along with change for school leaders and teachers. You’re coming up against years of work implementing other curricula that did not align to the rigor of the standards. Teachers have been wondering—will this work?”

A teacher in Detroit told Amy Bailey, EL’s managing director of district partnerships, “I’m scared, I don’t know if I can do this.” Bailey has heard this kind of doubt from teachers across the country and views the questioning and uncertainty as a step toward change. “Teachers often report that initially when they look at the curriculum, they believe it’s too hard for their students,” Bailey continues. “But as they see the changes in their students, and students feel it, the classroom environment starts to shift. When you walk into a classroom where implementation is moving forward, the change is palpable.”

A report from Mathematica found that English language arts teachers who participated in EL Education’s professional development program aligned with its curriculum significantly improved their instructional practices after one year.<sup>6</sup> This is true for both new and veteran teachers—demonstrating the potential of this kind of professional development to transform teacher practice. And after two years, the program had positive effects on students’ English language arts achievement.

From the beginning, EL Education understood that fostering student character development starts with teachers and school leaders modeling collaborative and supportive relationships with each other. This approach stands in sharp contrast to character building programs that focus exclusively on students. This process starts in the off-site teacher institute and continues through EL Education’s ongoing coaching and supports for curriculum implementation. Facilitators model collaboration norm setting and actively reinforce the norms through the interactions they have with teachers in regular professional development. These touch points vary according to the needs and structures of a particular district or school. Some schools use a master teacher structure to ensure regular coaching, while others carve out weekly collaborative planning times.

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APRIL IMPERIO, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, K-12 LITERACY, DPSCD

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<sup>6</sup> Sarah Dolfin et al., *Evaluation of the Teacher Potential Project*, Mathematica, June 28, 2019, <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/publications/evaluation-of-the-teacher-potential-project>.

It's important to get it right, says Bailey. "There is always a direct relationship between how much growth students experience and how much adults are modeling these qualities of respect, responsibility, courage, and kindness."

The DPSCD teacher institute modeled collaborative behavior by having teachers and school leaders learn side-by-side. Later in the school year, EL Education worked with the district to bring the principals back together for two days "to talk about what we're hearing and learning from teachers and how we can better support teachers in continued quality literacy instruction," says Imperio.

It's still early days for Detroit's transition to EL Education's curriculum, but already Imperio notices important changes. "In our previous program, we used basal readers that were quite antiquated," she explains. "Now the kids are excited about reading really high-quality novels and nonfiction articles—and engaging in conversations about them." One seventh grader's encounter with the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, Beth Gonzalez, illustrates the point. When asked how he liked the new materials, the boy volunteered how his class had been assigned to read a few chapters in a novel. "Don't tell my teacher," the boy said, "but last night, I read the whole book."

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**“**There is always a direct relationship between how much growth students experience and how much adults are modeling these qualities of respect, responsibility, courage, and kindness.”

AMY BAILEY, MANAGING DIRECTOR,  
DISTRICT PARTNERSHIPS, EL EDUCATION

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*The authors thank Bridgespan Editor Bradley Seeman for his help in drafting this case study.*



## CASE STUDY



### Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS)



**Year established:**  
2010



#### Goal:

Ensure students of all backgrounds have equal access to the most academically intense high school programs (AP and IB, specifically)—and particularly that low-income students and students of color have opportunities to succeed at the highest levels.



#### Impact:

Since its founding, EOS has helped more than 540 schools in 29 states identify and enroll more than 36,000 “missing students” (students of color and low-income students who meet AP and/or IB program qualifications but are not enrolled in such programs) and support their success in rigorous academic programs.



#### Change strategy:

(1) Introduces positive disruption by centering equity in a school’s work, first by enrolling missing students in advanced classes. (2) Focuses on the “whole learner” by collecting and sharing a fuller picture of each missing student through the Student Insight Card. (3) Fosters supportive relationships among educators by setting up an equity team in each school and working with school staff to reinforce equity goals, and by connecting a broader network of educators through the Equity Leader Labs.

## Helping Teachers Close the Classroom Equity Gap

By Lija Farnham

The Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs offer high school students college-level courses and the opportunity to earn college credits. More than two million students enroll each year, predominantly in AP. Participants, however, include relatively few students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, despite the fact that three-quarters of a million such students meet the program qualifications.

Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS) set out in 2010 to identify and champion enrollment of these “missing” students in AP and IB programs. That’s when Reid Saaris, the organization’s founder and former CEO, first began helping such students enroll and succeed in advanced courses as a high school teacher in South Carolina. Today, EOS’s portfolio includes 345 schools in 108 school districts, such as New York City, Chicago, San Francisco, and Prince George’s County, Maryland. Altogether, EOS has worked with 540 schools in 29 states and helped to enroll more than 36,000 in AP and IB programs.

Photo, above: San Diego Unified School District participants partner up in small teams to compete in the drawing contest, as part of the fourth Equity Leader Lab session. (May 2019) Credit: Chris Wojdak Photography/Equal Opportunity Schools ©2019

Despite initial skepticism by many teachers, adding previously excluded students of color and low-income students to advanced classes typically has had little to no effect on average course outcomes. Seventy-five percent of EOS schools maintain their average AP/IB exam pass rate and overall class GPA. EOS is not surprised. On average, EOS finds that across its partner schools, outside of AP courses, only 14 percent of students of color report being challenged by their courses. That means 86 percent of students of color are not getting challenged enough to be engaged and taken to the next level.

EOS begins its work with a school or district by collecting and sharing data—both enrollment data and the results of a survey of all students and staff. “Our starting point with the schools is establishing an urgency about increasing opportunities for students currently in their building—and having a solution-centered approach,” explains Sasha Rabkin, EOS’s chief strategy officer.

Many schools have not considered the extent to which some students are steered away from advanced classes. Nor have schools taken stock of student and teacher attitudes.

“[Missing] students’ aspirations for college tend to be higher than staff estimates of these aspirations,” says Adam Kay, EOS’s former director of effectiveness and learning. “This highlights the barriers these students face in pursuing AP classes. They think: ‘I don’t feel encouraged, I don’t feel welcome.’”

EOS also asks students to list the adults they trust—to both ensure that all students have positive, caring relationships with educators in their schools, and also to know which educators could lead outreach to missing students. “People are afraid that students will say, ‘I don’t trust anyone,’” says Bernadette Merikle, EOS’s senior director, strategy for racial equity impact. “Time and time again what we find is that students have multiple trusted adults. And for those students who don’t, we can work on that.”

EOS shares its analysis with the school “equity team,” made up of administrators, teachers, and counselors in charge of designing and implementing strategies to enroll the missing students and support their success. “We find when we get into the work that they have intuition about the disparities, but rarely do they know or appreciate the actual disparities,” Kay explains. In the vast majority of schools, a clear pattern emerges of students of color and those from low-income families being excluded from advanced courses. The equity team grapples with the reasons for these disparities, including school policies that create barriers for some students to pursue advanced classes, as well as the biases and assumptions teachers may have that prevent them from encouraging some students to pursue advanced courses. EOS’s school survey data set the stage for developing goals and strategies for enrolling more students of color and low-income students in AP and IB programs.

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“[Missing] students’ aspirations for college tend to be higher than staff estimates of these aspirations. This highlights the barriers these students face in pursuing AP classes. They think: ‘I don’t feel encouraged, I don’t feel welcome.’”

ADAM KAY, FORMER DIRECTOR, EFFECTIVENESS AND LEARNING, EOS

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Throughout the first year of its involvement, EOS works with school staff and leaders to develop a set of approaches and tools that work for that particular high school, building on the experience the organization has had in hundreds of other high schools. One especially important tool for helping schools find and support missing students is the Student Insight Card, which leverages survey and administrative data to outline student aspirations, strengths, learning mindsets, barriers to learning, academic track record, and teachers' recommendations for the student. The information on this one-page resource document helps educators to tailor outreach and build trusting relationships with students. The insight card "challenges the erasure and invisibility students of color experience and provides over 40 different data insights on each student," explains Rabkin. With that information in hand, the school can facilitate "belonging rich" experiences for each missing student and say, "we see you."

Insight cards also provide important information about student mindsets, a critical factor in academic success typically overshadowed by grades and test scores. In fact, EOS data show that schools frequently "only look through the lens of grades and test scores, which tends to marginalize a lot of students," says Kay. "However, teachers are all saying that learning mindsets are also important."

In the second year of EOS's work with a school, as a more diverse group of students enters AP/IB courses, teachers use the insight cards as a reference point to connect with these students on a personal level and support them to address barriers they may be facing. "When teachers finally receive their students' first semester grades, that can be powerful" says Kay. "A number of teachers come around in their predictions that some students will fail or struggle."



Equity Leader Lab participants collaborate in school groups to plan next year's activities that will sustain the equity momentum in each school. (May 2019) Credit: Chris Wojdak Photography/Equal Opportunity Schools ©2019

Also in the second year, EOS works to build supportive relationships not only within the school's equity team, but among a cross-section of school leaders and staff whose participation is essential to sustain the school's policy and practice shifts around AP/IB courses. EOS coaches share best practices and examples from other EOS sites, facilitate activities to help teachers share best practices with each other, and introduce research-based activities aimed at improving student sense of belonging.

In the third year, EOS uses training sessions called Equity Leader Labs that tackle difficult subjects like implicit bias and seek to build support to sustain the new policies and practices beyond the equity team. "There is always an expectation that the equity team alone can't get this work done," says Merikle. "Even if you have conversations with 200 or 300 kids to get them into AP, they could be in classes with teachers who have never heard about this work. Schools have more success when they take the time to bring more people into the vision of the equity team." Equity Leader Labs enable equity teams to deepen their capacity individually and collectively to sustain the work within their schools.

EOS provides coaches throughout implementation and during the Equity Leader Labs to support each school's efforts. Educators also can reach out to other schools and districts in the EOS network for advice and tips. This enables school leaders and teachers to share best practices and build a network of equity-focused practitioners.

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*The author thanks Bridgespan Editor Bradley Seeman for his help in drafting this case study.*

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“People are afraid that students will say, ‘I don’t trust anyone.’ Time and time again what we find is that students have multiple trusted adults. And for those students who don’t, we can work on that.”

BERNADETTE MERIKLE, SENIOR DIRECTOR, STRATEGY FOR RACIAL EQUITY IMPACT, EOS

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## The BARR Center



**Year established:**  
1999



### Goal:

Focuses on the make-or-break transitional year ninth graders face in moving up from middle school to high school. The BARR model uses eight interlocking strategies that build intentional relationships, utilize real-time data, and enable schools to achieve concrete academic, social and emotional outcomes for all students.



### Impact:

The BARR model is the first and only school-improvement intervention to successfully climb the three tiers of evidence required under the US Department of Education's Investing in Innovation (i3) program. BARR operates in over 100 high schools in 15 states and the District of Columbia. Over the next three years, the number of BARR schools is set to more than double.



### Change strategy:

(1) Introduces a positive disruption by requiring schools to embrace eight interconnected strategies that change the way teachers and staff work. (2) Focuses on the "whole learner" by prioritizing relationship building as the foundation for improved academic performance. (3) Fosters supportive relationships among educators by requiring three ninth-grade teachers from core academic areas to form a team that works with the same group of students.

# Helping Teachers Connect with Each Other and Their Students

By Lija Farnham and Aviva Altmann

Twenty-one years ago, Angela Jerabek nearly quit her job as a ninth-grade counselor at St. Louis Park High School in suburban Minneapolis. She felt discouraged over the high number of ninth graders failing at least one course, and helpless to remedy the problem. Encouraged by her school's principal, she channeled her frustration into developing an innovative program that builds connections between students and teachers to help both succeed. She called it Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR). BARR focuses on ninth graders because they face a make-or-break transitional year from middle school to high school. Research shows that students who succeed in the ninth grade tend to graduate. Many who struggle eventually drop out.

Today, BARR operates in over 100 high schools in 15 states and the District of Columbia, and Jerabek is CEO of a fast-growing organization. Over the next three years, the number of BARR schools is expected to more than double with financial support from the US Department

Photo, above: Students participate in the Lollipop Moment I-Time—an activity in which students and staff reflect on a time someone did or said something that made a difference in their lives. They then write letters to those people and school staff will assist with sending them if students choose to. Credit: Zachary Smith

of Education. BARR stands out as the sole project among 172 federal education innovation grants to progress through randomized controlled trials to win funding at three levels: innovation, development, and scaling up.

Its results are striking. The **BARR model** has been proven to create statistically significant impacts in 19 areas of academic performance and outcomes for students, teachers, and schools. And a *Hechinger Report* article says, “A little-known program has lifted ninth grade performance in virtually every type of school.” Fewer students ultimately drop out because they feel more engaged and challenged at school. The effects are particularly large for students of color, male students, and students from low-income families.

BARR’s model disrupts the status quo, but not in ways typical of innovative educational programs. It doesn’t require hiring new teachers or changing the student body. It doesn’t overhaul the curriculum or lean on new technology. Instead, it is based on something surprisingly simple. BARR trains teachers to identify and build on students’ strengths to help them thrive in school. To a significant extent, thriving in school requires addressing nonacademic reasons why students fall behind. Hence, BARR prioritizes relationship building as the foundation for improved academic performance.

So how does BARR accomplish all this? It starts with a school adopting BARR’s eight interconnected strategies that fundamentally change the way not just teachers, but administrators, counselors, and the rest of the school staff interact with students.

The strategies:

1. Focus on the whole student,
2. Provide professional development for the staff,
3. Use class time to build social and emotional skills,
4. Create teams of students,
5. Schedule weekly meetings for teachers to discuss students on their teams,
6. Separately plan interventions for high-risk students,
7. Engage administrative staff, and
8. Engage families.

To implement this multifaceted strategy, BARR provides an operating structure that translates aspiration to action. Here’s how it works.

The BARR Center supports schools through the initial disruption that may come with adoption of the model. Specifically, they provide an initial two day in-person BARR implementation training, with two trainers, one of which becomes the school’s dedicated BARR coach. Through weekly planning, coaching and on-site visits, the BARR coach guides school staff to ensure they get the initial lift towards high fidelity implementation and achievement of their identified school goals.

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“ In every aspect of the model, from the frame itself, down to the day-to-day operations, the first question every teacher has to answer is, ‘What is the student’s strength?’”

ANGELA JERABEK, FOUNDER, BARR

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BARR's model requires at least three ninth-grade teachers from core academic areas to form a team that works with the same group of students. That means, for instance, the same students have English, math, and social studies together. A large high school may have multiple teacher teams, each with a distinctive student cohort. This team and cohort approach often requires significant retooling of the way schools handle class assignments. But it's critical for the BARR model.

These cross-disciplinary teams change the way teachers interact. In a typical high school, teachers meet periodically for departmental professional development discussions. BARR breaks down the departmental silos and shifts the conversation from a strictly academic focus to a whole-student perspective.

That more complete view of students takes shape in weekly team meetings, called block time, where teachers share observations of each student's strengths and challenges. Block time centers on what Jerabek calls one of the BARR model's "defining pillars": real-time data. The team works off a spreadsheet that builds a picture of each student by reviewing a variety of in-school factors, including progress in class, attendance, and behavior. The team also discusses factors outside the school, such as extracurricular interests, personal health, issues with other students, or troubles at home. All this data collection allows the team to flag challenges early and work together to solve problems. Importantly, teachers track not just problems but student strengths to identify achievable goals to get or keep students on track for success. "In every aspect of the model, from the frame itself, down to the day-to-day operations, the first question every teacher has to answer is, 'What is the student's strength?'" says Jerabek.



Students share their lollipop moment with conference attendees. Credit: Zachary Smith

Gene Roundtree, headmaster of Snowden International School, a Boston public school, says BARR's emphasis on holistic understanding helped teachers to better support their students. "Before, I don't think our whole team had the opportunity to share the information we have in ways that allow us to understand the totality of the student experience at times where we can plan interventions," says Roundtree. "BARR allows us to have more touchpoints with the students and fewer cracks for the kids to slip into." As an example of this, Jerabek tells the troubling story of another school, where this process of teachers sharing notes on the same students to better understand their full stories led to the discovery that three girls were victims of sex trafficking.

For students coping with the toughest situations in and out of school, BARR's model requires a weekly "risk review" meeting that involves more specialized staff, such as the truancy prevention coordinator, school nurse, or school psychologist. They consider the need for tapping community resources to assist with a range of issues, such as eating disorders, fears of deportation, family dysfunction, or chronic illness.

The second "defining pillar" of the BARR program, says Jerabek, is cultivation of "positive intentional relationships." Team teachers take turns guiding a weekly class discussion called I-Time (as in the personal pronoun) that focuses on relationship building among classmates and between teachers and students. BARR provides teachers a list of discussion topics and coaches them on how to facilitate conversations that tap into social and emotional skill development. The year starts out with activities that help students get to know each other and progresses to deeper conversations, such as race, bullying, and substance abuse.

It is not unusual for teachers to express skepticism of the BARR model when first introduced. Josh Tripp, a former math teacher and now the principal of Bucksport High School in Maine, remembers his initial hesitation. "I was trying to figure out whether this would really show a big benefit to our school," he recalls. "Our graduation rate was only 73 percent, so we had to try something. I was on board, but I was a little skeptical of the SEL (social and emotional learning) piece. I was that math teacher saying, 'do I have to give up 30 minutes of my week and not do math?' The program pushed me outside my comfort level." Bucksport's graduation rate is now 90 percent.

Skepticism shifts to support as teachers see the power of the program. Pedro Nuño, the BARR coordinator for Moreno Valley Unified School District in California, observes that the relationships built during I-Time not only helped to improve students' behavior, but actually transformed how students saw him as a resource and supporter. "We did a lot of activities that didn't involve math, and I got to know kids on a personal level," says Nuño. "We got to build those relationships, so they were willing to do the work because they didn't want to disappoint me. The kids need to know that we care about them."

Students benefit, in good measure, because BARR strengthens relationships among teachers and school staff. Cross-disciplinary cohort-based teams break down typical

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“ BARR allows us to have more touchpoints with the students and fewer cracks for the kids to slip into.”

GENE ROUNDTREE, HEADMASTER, SNOWDEN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL, BOSTON

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department-level silos and foster collaboration among teachers and staff to better understand and serve students.

Teachers spoke to how BARR's block-time relationship-building experience pushed them to be vulnerable with each other. Tripp, the Bucksport High principal, says coming together with other teachers around a student cohort, and seeing some teachers succeed with students better than others, caused him to push his own professional development more than other experiences he'd had. "It's a reflective process for me," he explains. "What is it about my class, my instructional strategy, that is not working for the student? It exposes real vulnerabilities for teachers, and it's also a great opportunity for professional growth."

Collaboration also encourages teachers to hold each other accountable. The block-time meetings require all teachers in the cohort to participate and play equal roles to ensure the success of the meeting. Tripp says that teachers at his school now realize if they don't get their data together, the meeting isn't productive. "My colleagues are sitting here, thinking, 'why didn't you do all the stuff that needs to be done?'" he adds. "They are increasingly accountable to their peers, and that is so powerful."

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